



Policy in Practice

How Far to Take Gun Control?

A few days before Christmas in 2012, the nation was plunged into grief by a tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut. A gunman killed 20 children—first-graders, ages 6 and 7—along with six adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School, before killing himself. It was not the first mass shooting the nation had witnessed that year, but the death of young children in their neighborhood school revived the gun control debate in a way that nothing had in years.

Not all politicians responded in the same way, however. President Obama pledged to do everything in his power to prevent future tragedies of this sort. Democrats in the U.S. Senate pledged to bring up bans on assault-style weapons and large-capacity magazines such as the shooter had used in Connecticut. Lawmakers in states such as California pledged to respond with similar measures, while localities such as San Diego rushed to expand gun buyback programs.

But not everyone embraced these traditional types of restrictions on firearms or newer ideas for tagging or taxing ammunition. The National Rifle Association (NRA) responded to the shooting by calling for armed personnel and police to be put in every school—an idea that legislators in some states, such as Missouri and Tennessee, had already talked about. “It’s magnified in the moment, but I expect red states will vote to expand gun rights and the blue states will seek to enact gun control legislation,” said Scott Melzer, an expert on

gun politics at Albion College in Michigan, in the days following the shooting.^a

Would tougher gun control laws save lives? For some people, the answer is obvious. In 2011, the United States suffered 11,000 gun-related homicides. Countries with strict gun control laws, such as Great Britain and Japan, had well under 50 apiece. For others, the very suggestion of outlawing handguns is outrageous. Many gun owners view individual firearms ownership as a basic constitutional right—a point of view the Supreme Court has upheld twice in the past few years. The Second Amendment proclaims, “A well-regulated militia being necessary for the security of a free state, the right to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.” Some have argued that allowing citizens to carry concealed weapons would improve overall public safety. They claim that the country would be safer if more Americans carried guns. The massacre of 32 people at Virginia Tech in 2007 led some states to make it easier to carry concealed weapons on college campuses.

In general, the courts have not agreed with this more expansive interpretation of the Constitution. As a result, the extent of your right to bear arms depends very much on where you live. Thirty-five states essentially require law enforcement agencies to provide concealed weapon licenses to any law-abiding citizens who apply. Ten states give law enforcement agencies the discretion to issue or deny concealed weapons licenses based on a variety of factors. Illinois was the last state that banned concealed